

## St. John's program provides more than staffing

by Leanne H. Frost

It's 4 p.m., and 186 patients at St. John's Lutheran Home need to be transported to the dining area. There aren't enough certified nursing assistants (CNAs) to move and feed everyone. In come the Elder Chabars.

Two and a half years ago St. John's created a program to help ease the immediate staffing shortage and to encourage high school students to enter the medical field. The program, called Elder Chabar, "chabar" being the Hebrew word for companion or fellowship, has proved to be beneficial for the students participating, the home's residents, and St. John's nursing staff.

The students, aged 16 and up, are

employed by St. John's as assistants to the nurse's aides. The Elder Chabars can not take care of any medical needs or feed the residents, due to national regulations, but they are helpful in other ways. Selected from among the Honor Society students at Billings' high schools, they transport patients, change bed linens, pass out meal trays, distribute ice water to help reduce patient dehydration, play card games with the residents, and simply offer companionship to those needing a listening ear or comforting touch.

Sylvia Gollick, director of resident care service for St. John's Lutheran Ministries, said having the Elder Chabars in the nursing home takes some of the pressure off of the CNAs, who in turn can offer more assistance to the LPNs and RNs. "The

CNAs and nurses tell me frequently that they don't know how they did it before we had them (the Elder Chabars)," she said.

The students undergo an eight-hour training program that teaches skills, including wheelchair transportation, dining room procedures, and washing and making a bed. The training also includes information on patients' rights and the importance of the participants' jobs at the nursing home. They work with the speech pathologist and occupational therapist as well.

Participants only earn \$5.25 an hour, but St. John's also creates a scholarship for each Elder Chabar participant who works at least 200 hours by placing one dollar in a trust fund for each hour worked above the 200-hour minimum. For some students, that can add up to more than \$1,000 upon graduation. The money is paid directly to the school of the student's choice.

Besides helping alleviate a personnel crunch, St. John's CEO Kent Burgess said one of the main goals was to get high school students into the nursing home to help them overcome their fear of nursing homes and working with the elderly.

Burgess said the students can take the 80-hour CNA course and become certified.

Gollick said she knows of four or five program participants who have become CNAs.

Currently, approximately 20 students participate in the program. The students



**Terra Stiller, left, part of the Elder Chabar program, talks with St. John's resident Ann Schruth.**

*photo courtesy St. John's Lutheran Ministries*

self-schedule and enjoy the flexible hours.

Gollick said she has heard of similar programs in the country, but the difference in the Elder Chabar program is the focus on building relationships with the residents.

"You can hire and pay people to assist, but the staff really wanted residents to benefit," said Gollick. "The biggest effect is the gift they (Elder Chabars) bring to the residents: youth and companionship."